St Cinderella, a Virgin Martyr: Literary and Iconographic Translations of the Legend of St Margaret of Antioch

Juliana Dresvina

The legend of St Margaret of Antioch was well known throughout medieval Europe both in verse and in prose, and over thirty versions of it – in Latin, Old and Middle English as well as in Anglo-Norman and French – circulated in medieval England.[1] Its content is in many ways typical for an early Christian virgin martyr and includes childhood conversion, a pagan suitor who persecutes the saint, gory tortures and final beheading. It also featured several memorable episodes, such as Margaret's confrontation with a hideous demonic dragon, which burst asunder after trying to swallow the saint, her violent subjection of the devil, who came to tempt her in prison, and her final prayer, in which she asks God to prosper her devotees and especially that no disabled children be born in their households. These lively details captured the imagination of medieval people and became firmly established in iconography, making St Margaret one of the most frequently represented saints between the ninth and the sixteenth centuries. This article aims to highlight manifold strategies of translation of texts and images, illustrated by both literary and artistic evidence of St Margaret's cult.

The story of St Margaret, if stripped of its religious content, becomes easily recognisable in a different genre. A girl of extraordinary beauty from a noble family, whose mother has died early, becomes detestable to her father and is sent away from his palace to a humble cottage in the countryside, where she is brought up by a wise woman. There she hears stories about the perfect prince and falls in love with him, refusing to consider anyone else. Performing one of the outdoor chores of her godmother's poor household, the girl

[1] A catalogue and a detailed discussion of these versions can be found in my unpublished PhD thesis 'The Cult of St Margaret of Antioch in Medieval England' (University of Cambridge, 2007).

encounters a mighty ruler, who is riding with his retinue to the city nearby. He is astonished by the poor girl's beauty and takes her with him, in spite of her protests. In the city, she still refuses to marry the ruler, professing her love for the prince. Therefore she is put to various impossible tests, which she successfully passes with the help of her godmother and aids sent by the prince, who knows about her love for him. Finally, the wicked ruler commands his henchman to kill the girl, but the assassin is at first unable to accomplish the order on account of the girl's beauty, innocence and royal descent. The story reaches its climax when, just before the fatal blow, the prince himself appears in a flash in order to praise the girl's perseverance, calls her his true love and bride, and welcomes her to his great and glorious palace.

If in this story the prince's name is Jesus Christ, then we are dealing with a virgin saint's Life, here modelled on a Life of St Margaret. If, however, we name the prince as Prince Charming, the whole narrative becomes a fairy-tale belonging to what folklorists call 'the Cinderella-cycle', from the sub-cycle known as 'the Outcast Child'.[2] The motif is ancient and must have existed well before the formation of hagiography as a genre. In the Middle Ages Cinderella-type stories were also employed in romances, along with saints' lives and folkloric tales. Scholars noticed trilateral links between medieval romances, saints' Lives and fairy-tales long ago, agreeing that a more or less complete and plausible reconstruction of the complicated hierarchy of these genres' cross-fertilization would be impossible.[3]

In the light of this connection between the written and the oral, it is important to consider the relationship between virgin martyrs' narratives in Latin and their vernacular revisions: which aspects of the legend the vernacular renderings elaborate on and how such additions relate to certain folkloric motifs. A comparison between the Middle English and Anglo-Norman versions of the Life of St Margaret and their Latin sources demonstrates that one of the areas where most of the revisions or additions take place is the heroine's childhood. Latin *vitae* usually make only passing remarks about the early history of the martyrs before moving to the martyrdom itself; medieval vernacular recasts, although produced in a pre-Freudian era, frequently find it necessary to provide curious details and explanations concerning the holy children's family background. For Margaret, these additions concern the three people who make their appearance in her childhood, exercising their authority over the saintly child: her nurse, her mother and her father.

---

[2] Anna Birgitta Rooth, *The Cinderella Cycle* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); *Cinderella: A Casebook*, ed. by Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982, repr. 1988).

[3] The most obvious example of such a Cinderella in medieval literature is Boccaccio/Petrarch/Chaucer's Griselda. For the early discussion of the subject see Marian Roafle Cox, *Cinderella: Three Hundred and Forty-Five Variants of Cinderella, Catskin, and Cap o'Rushes*, Publications of the Folklore Society, 31 (London: The Folk-lore Society, 1893).

In what little the early versions[4] disclose about Margaret's family, the largest portion of the supplied information concerns the nurse, whose influence shapes Margaret's personality and provides her with what her parents could not give. She brings the girl up with love, introduces her to Christianity and encourages that fervent devotion which later becomes the reason for her ward's glorification; she educates the saint by telling her the tales of Christian martyrs; she becomes her governess and her foster-mother.

St Margaret's education by her nurse is reminiscent of St Anne's education of the Virgin, which is also reflected in the iconography: the striking parallelism of the Virgin taught by her mother and St Margaret taught by her nurse is hard to miss (plates 1-2).[5] The nurse is almost invariably depicted holding a book, which suggests that in her mentoring of the saint she uses not only the spoken but also written word. However, only one written Life[6] indicates that the girl received more formal education; in the case of the rest the nurse's literacy remains a subject of conjecture, if not wishful thinking.[7]

The nurse tells the tales to educate, edify and entertain – an aim identical with the hagiographic narrative, of which she becomes part. The figure of the nurse could also signify the church, which becomes the true mother of believers, nourishing and raising them spiritually. However, from the point of view of the male cleric who composed the Latin *Passio*, even in such a metaphorical reading the nurse is dangerously reminiscent of the image of a wise old woman, an age-old (and therefore pagan) Sibylline figure, a fairy-tale 'old crone' narrator, in Marina Warner's words.[8] Warner shows how the word 'gossip' (God-parent in Old and Middle English) gradually falls out of its association with its close relative, 'gospel', both originally associated with good news, God's words, and starts to signify useless or harmful prattle of godmothers, midwives and nurses within exclusively female circles. Also alarming is the status of this Mother Goose, this gossiping nurse – unattached, unmarried, and therefore uncontrolled in her actions and speech. She is the one who

---

[4] Greek: *Acta s. Marinae et s. Christophori, Festschrift zur fünften Säcularfeier der [...] Universität zu Heidelberg*, ed. by Hermann Usener (Bonn: Universitäts-buchdruckerei von C. Georgi, 1886); Latin: *The Old English Lives of St Margaret*, ed. by Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 9 (Cambridge: CUP, 1994).

[5] I would like to thank the Director and Benefactors of the Marc Fitch Fund for assisting me with the purchase of some of the images used in this article.

[6] A fourteenth-century variation of an earlier stanzaic Life: 'Anon as sche was of eld, Mergrete was sett to boke', Karl Reichl, *Religiöse Dichtung im Englischen Hochmittelalter* (München: Fink, 1973), p. 171.

[7] A more enthusiastic interpretation of the nurse's literacy, as well as a slightly different view of her role in Margaret's life can be found in Katherine J. Lewis, 'The Life of St Margaret of Antioch in Late Medieval England: A Gendered Reading', *Gender in Christian Religion: Studies in Church History*, 34 (1998), 129-42.

[8] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 17.

tells the tale, not only of the historical martyrs, but also of Margaret herself – she is her mentor, helper and the eye-witness of her exploits; she is the one who brings food to her in prison and who buries her body after the execution. The classically-educated author of the *Mombritius* must have felt uneasy about such an overwhelming influence and authority of the dingy country woman, and provides her with a learned male counterpart Theotimus, who is present at the window of Margaret's prison-cell with a scroll, taking notes, who takes responsibility for her burial and then composes and disseminates her *Vita*. His presence is strong in the first-person preamble and epilogue, where he persistently emphasizes his monopoly of the martyr's tale.[9] And yet his voice is perceived as only an artificial frame outside the immediate narrative, whereas the nurse is firmly grounded in it despite all attempts to de-emphasize her role, despite his having a name and her remaining nameless and voiceless. The author of an Old English Life apparently considered insufficient the partial steps of the Latin *Passiones* towards elimination of the nurse's authority, so he did away with the nurse altogether, replacing her with Theotimus as Margaret's guardian and mentor.[10]

In the later vernacular versions, however, the voice of the old woman found its way surreptitiously back into the narrative. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century Lives, both English and French, the first-person address of Theotimus by and large disappears, and he is mostly mentioned once towards the end, with his name often corrupt, as the person who wrote the legend down – or not mentioned at all.[11] Theotimus hardly ever features in the pictorial cycles of St Margaret, and neither do her parents, unlike the nurse who is depicted regularly.

The nurse thus not only retains her position, but also sometimes strengthens it, playing a more active role in her protégée's life. No version seems to suggest directly that the nurse baptized Margaret, thus becoming both her godmother and priest, although this conclusion could be made – as was made, for example, by the artist of a mid-fourteenth century French Book of Hours, containing a verse Life of St Margaret.[12] To be sure, midwives and nurses were

---

[9] Clayton and Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St Margaret*, pp. 195, 217.

[10] Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 303: 'The pious servant of God Theotimus fostered this blessed maiden and taught her and trained her until she was fifteen years old', Clayton and Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St Margaret*, p. 153.

[11] For example, early thirteenth-century *Seinte Marherete, the Meiden ant Martyr* from the *Katherine Group* (viz. *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse*, ed. by Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], pp. 44-85); mid thirteenth-century stanzaic *Meidan Maregrete* (viz. Reichl, *Religiöse Dichtung im Englischen Hochmittelalter*, pp. 163-249); late thirteenth-century Life from the *South English Legendary* (viz. *The South English Legendary*, ed. by Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna Jean Mill, EETS, o.s. 235 [London: OUP, 1956-59], pp. 293-302).

[12] Pierpont Morgan Library MS M754 (1320s), fol. 114^{v}. There is one more enigmatic picture of a woman baptizing another woman, found in the Luttrell Psalter

allowed to baptize children in case of hazard to the infant's life, but in the illustration the saint looks too old and healthy to be in peril. The role of the nurse as the god-mother progresses to that of the fairy god-mother in a thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman version: when she brings food and drink to the prison, she appears not outside, but inside the cell, as if by miracle:

> En la chartre oscure sa norrice aparut
> En li porta dont ele manja et but;
> Ce fu le present nostre Sire De
> Qui par miracle li fu envoie.[13]
>
> [The nurse appeared in the dark cell, herself bringing in her (i.e. Margaret's) food and drink; that was a present from our Lord God that was sent to her by miracle.]

The nurse's authority over the saint is displayed not only in spiritual and educational matters, but also in Margaret's obedience in tending her foster-mother's sheep, which she does, as some versions remark, eagerly without complaints.[14] Unlike Cinderella, whose household chores are the results of her stepmother's hatred and the distorted family situation, Margaret's lowly occupation is precisely a consequence of a healthy, loving relationship of wise parental authority and filial submission. Margaret's foster-family experience is that of godly balance: a thirteenth century Middle English version states that Margaret was the youngest and the most loved of the (apparently husbandless) nurse's eight children – another fairy-tale motif of the youngest and most beautiful child being the foundling. It is made clear there that she is neither oppressed, nor becomes an idle pet, but is perfectly integrated into her foster family, sharing in their work (sheep-tending) and leisure (listening to her godmother's tales).[15]

The sight of such an exemplary household makes one ponder on whether Margaret's constantly repeated unwillingness to marry and her desire to preserve her virginity were not only a result of her Christian devotion, but also of the striking 'unnaturalness' of her natural family (as shown in what follows)

(British Library Additional 42130) in the margin of Psalm 51(52) (fol. 97^{v}), bearing no apparent connection to the text on the page – Michael Camille calls this picture, without explanation, 'a virginal bath'; see Michael Camille, *Mirror in Parchment: The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), p. 142.

[13] Paul Meyer, 'Notice du MS Sloane 1611', *Romania*, 40 (1911), 549.

[14] Most Anglo-Norman versions, for which see *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. by Brigitte Cazelles (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); late fourteenth-century Scottish Life, printed in *Altenglische Legenden, Neue Folge*, ed. by Johann Carl Horstmann (Heilbronn: Henninger, 1881), pp. 3-12; Bodleian Library MS Eng. th. e.18 fol. 1^{v} (late fifteenth century).

[15] Reichl, *Religiöse Dichtung im Englischen Hochmittelalter*, pp. 171, 173; also MS Eng. th. e.18, fols 1^{v}-2^{r}.

and of the unmarried status of her dearly beloved nurse. One wonders whether the two adults, flanking the child Margaret in the peaceful image from a poem by Wace (plate 3), are meant to represent the nurse and Theotimus rather than the saint's parents.

Margaret's pagan mother features in the story only once, where she is said to be dead, conveniently vacating the space for the Christian nurse. The Latin sources do not make it clear whether she died in childbirth or immediately afterwards, and if she lived, then what her attitude was towards her only daughter and to her being sent away. If she indeed died in childbirth, then it justifies her complete absence from the original story and explains Margaret's father's hatred towards his daughter, originating in a conviction that her birth caused his wife's death. His wish to get rid of her may also be seen as a plan to start a new family, which would possibly produce an heir. One way or another, Margaret's natural mother is also the nurse's (i.e. the original narrator's) rival for both the saint and the listeners, who through the edifying tale become her children as well, and therefore from this point of view the saint's real mother's absence is convenient. It is ironic too that the virgin Margaret, who started her career on earth by becoming the unwilling cause of her mother's death, later was made the patron-saint of childbirth. Cinderella's name derived from the cinders, the ashes – not only of the hearth by which she had to dwell, but also of mourning for her dead mother, of penitence.[16] Apparently both Cinderella's and Margaret's unintended sin, of which they repent in rags and ashes, is matricide. Margaret's own avoidance of an earthly marriage and hence of pains and possibly even death in childbirth is subsequently redeemed through pains and death caused precisely by this avoidance. But in the process of the fatal labours she is born anew, first of a dragon, again killing her surrogate demonic 'mother', and then of the baptismal water, resulting in the death of the 5,000 converted bystanders – the thrice-deadly child.

However, not all the translators – nor indeed artists – were satisfied with the obscure fate of the saint's genitrix. In a number of vernacular recasts she does not die immediately and has her own role and attitude towards her daughter's destiny. In some variations of the stanzaic Life, Margaret's father wants to kill his daughter (because he foresees her becoming a Christian); her mother, though also heathen, secretly saves the infant by sending her to the nurse.[17] The rationale for the pagan patriarch's desire to kill his daughter is not always given, which points towards a fairy-tale motif of a jealous husband, who, unfoundedly suspecting his wife of adultery, gives orders to kill or cast out either his wife and the child together, or just the offspring.[18]

More intriguing is the interpretation of the only version that reports Margaret's mother siding with her husband in his desire to get the newborn daugh-

[16] Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 206.

[17] Reichl, *Religiöse Dichtung im Englischen Hochmittelalter*, pp. 169-71.

[18] Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 262.

ter off their hands (see also panel 1 of plate 4).[19] However unnatural such behaviour may appear, we should bear in mind that the oppressive female of the Cinderella-cycle tales has been made stepmother only relatively recently, following modern sentiments about the primary value of the initial family nucleus. In the Middle Ages, as well as in the Early Modern period, the place of the wicked stepmother was often occupied by a closer relative, often the mother herself, as it still is in the case of Hansel and Gretel, or Red Riding Hood.[20] Psychologically, if a good mother becomes a bad mother, she dies in relation to the child; so, whatever role Margaret's mother played in her daughter's deprivation, from a fairy-tale point of view, as well as from that of a virgin martyr tale's, a good mother is always a dead mother.[21]

The evidence of Margaret's mother's unnatural behaviour is suggested only in one variant of the vernacular lives, and the text is silent about its reasons. The silence of many versions about her father's reasons to hate the saint is perhaps as eloquent and suggestive as their speech. Only in one Life is it made clear that Theodosius hated his child on account of her gender – he obviously expected a son.[22] Some versions explain that it was because he learned that Margaret either had become, or would become, Christian. But this apparent and convenient rationale is often neglected, and in many versions Margaret's father hates her unconditionally, without knowing of her chosen faith. This paternal disregard and hatred can be due to her being a cause or reminder of her mother's premature death – a motif found in many versions of the Cinderella-cycle.

Another motif, however, can explain this hatred, which is otherwise unaccountable since it is not connected with Margaret's conversion. Unspeakable in a piece of godly hagiography, it does appear in fairy-tales as a possibility of incest – the 'unnatural father', in folklorists' terms, wants to marry his own daughter (on account of her striking similarity to his late wife) – and, having been rejected, he either makes her flee or persecutes her. In virgin-martyr legends these roles are usually divided between the saint's father and her suitor, but not always. The thirteenth century Netherlands and Westphalia witnessed a rise of the cult of St Dipne (Dimpna), whose story, featuring unconsum-

---

[19] Reichl, *Religiöse Dichtung im Englischen Hochmittelalter*, p. 70.

[20] For example, in the original *Snow White* tale, written down by the Grimms, it was the heroine's own mother who wanted to murder Snow White in her jealousy: Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls & Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 81, 181-2.

[21] Julius E. Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales: Their Origin, Meaning and Usefulness* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1974), p. 224, 225.

[22] Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 303, viz. Clayton and Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St Margaret*, p. 153.

mated incest, is a striking conjunction of a virgin-martyr legend and a Cinderella-type fairytale.[23]

A pagan Irish king is determined to marry someone who is as beautiful as his recently deceased wife. Having realized that no one can conform to this demand except for his daughter Dimpna, a replica of her late mother, he starts pursuing her. Being Christian and therefore terrified by her father's advances, she flees with her confessor, an old saintly priest, to the Continent, where both live as hermits in separate cells in a wilderness near Antwerp. The king, mad with hatred, discovers them, kills the priest and then beheads his daughter with his own sword. She is consequently canonized on account of her martyrdom.

The author of St Dimpna's Latin *Vita* testifies that it is based entirely on vernacular sources, the story thus being a rebounding loan, a piece of hagiography travelling from Latin into the vernacular and back.[24] Echoes of such hagiography – fairly-tale conjunction can be found in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Book VIII, which include stories of Antiochius's fallen daughter and Apollonius's pious one (the subject later employed by Shakespeare in *Pericles*); significantly, both maids were influenced by their nurses. The story derives from the late classical tale of Apollonius of Tyre, popular in the Middle Ages, and medieval listeners would probably recognize the motif which lay behind the silence of Margaret's legends, the same location – Antioch – being an additional clue to the educated audience.[25] Furthermore, it may be no coincidence that in at least one manuscript of an English translation of *Gesta Romanorum* the name of the father from the story of an outcast daughter (also from the Cinderella cycle) is not Leyre (Lear) but Theodosius.[26]

Within the 'Unnatural Father' group a frequent theme was the heroine's self-mutilation in order to avoid the incestuous marriage, the thirteenth-century French romance *La Manikene* being the earliest variation on this subject. Another variation is the unabridged versions of the Donkey Skin sub-cycle, where the heroine chops her hand off. St Lucy, who gouged out her eyes, is one more example of such self-mutilation. In hagiography the unnatural desire for the virgin saint is transferred from her father on to her suitor, although often her parent is tellingly much more eager to punish her for refusal. For instance, St Christine's father enclosed his daughter in a tower and would let

---

[23] *Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur. Vel a catholicis scriptoribus celebrantur quae ex latinis & graecis, aliarumque gentium antiquis monumentis*, ed. by Jean-Baptiste Carnandet and others, Editio Novissima, 67 vols (Paris: V. Palmé, 1863-83), Maius, III, 479-89.

[24] '[...] de vulgari eloquio in Latinum redigerem idioma', Carnandet, *Acta sanctorum*, p. 479.

[25] On the development of Apollonius's story, see Elizabeth Archibald's *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001).

[26] British Library MS Harley 7333; *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. by Sidney John Hervon Herrtage, EETS, e.s. 33 (London: N. Trübner & Co, 1879), p. 48.

no man approach her. When he discovers that in her solitude Christine became Christian through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and committed herself entirely to Christ, he subjected her to numerous tortures of incredible cruelty:

> Christine then took part of her flesh and threw it in the visage of her father saying: 'O tyrant, take the flesh, which thou hast gotten, and eat it' […]. Then he commanded that she should be put in prison, and on the morn to be beheaded. And that same night Urban her father was found dead.[27]

It is not clear whether he was killed by God for his impiety, or if he died of a broken heart.

Margaret, too, is almost asking for mutilating tortures in order to avoid Olibrius, the ruler of Antioch, who appears on her father's throne without any explanation of what happened to Theodosius. Thus he either stands for, or replaces her father in his pagan unnatural desire for her, his incestuous love-hatred of his own child. In fact, the idea of a father unwittingly committing incest with his own daughter, abandoned by him in her infancy and ending up in a brothel, was familiar to the early Christian Fathers. A study of the practice of abandonment of children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance begins with a startling quotation: 'How many fathers,' asks Clement of Alexandria, 'forgetting the children they abandoned, unknowingly have sexual relations with a son who is a prostitute or a daughter become a harlot?' 'Those who use the services [of prostitutes],' Justin Martyr warned, 'may well commit incest with a child, a relative, or a sibling.'[28]

In an early sixteenth-century carved altar of St Margaret from Northern Germany, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, one notices a close similarity between the appearance of Theodosius and Olibrius: the same curly hair, the same type of beard, similar tall headgear and flowing garment (plate 4). Panel 1, where baby Margaret is shown to her father, echoes the scene of panel 4, where the already grown-up Margaret is brought before Olibrius. On panels 3 and 4 of the altarpiece each of these men appears in a similar posture with the city wall on the background. In fact, the bearded man on panel 3 is probably meant to represent both Theodosius and Olibrius: although he wears Theodosius's turban-like hat, his place in the pictorial sequence coincides with the written legend's comment that Olibrius was heathen and worshipped idols. Moreover, many vernacular legends use very similar words to describe the two, as has been recently noticed.[29] One unnatural father, having turned into two

---

[27] *The Golden Legend, or, Lives of the Saints, as Englished by William Caxton*, ed. by Frederick Startridge Ellis, 7 vols (London: Temple Classics, 1900), IV, 46.

[28] Cited in John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe From Late Antiquity to The Renaissance* (London: The Penguin Press, 1988), p. 3.

[29] *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, ed. by Sherry L. Reames, Martha G. Blalock and Wendy R. Larson (Kalamazoo, Michigan: TEAMS, 2003), p. 128.

pagans of the same sex, faith, authority and appearance, returns to his original self eight centuries later.

In the places where the cults of saints were not suppressed by the Reformation, the end of the virgin martyr legends coincided with the beginning of the fairy-tale as a literary genre, when the well-known fairy tales such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Beauty and the Beast and Red Riding Hood were produced.[30] The ancient motifs underwent one more metamorphosis, as old iconographical clichés were recycled to receive a new life.

The images of St Dimpna, whose cult was flourishing in the sixteenth-nineteenth centuries, is a reflection of the same process of cultural translation and appropriation: although there is no direct mention of a demon or a dragon in her *Vita*, she is increasingly depicted standing on a chained devil holding a cross or a sword and thus becoming indistinguishable from medieval images of St Margaret and St Juliana (plates 5 and 6).[31] The iconographical connection between St Margaret and St Dimpna is made clear in the Holy Kindred and the Trinity Triptych made in the South Netherlands in about 1510 (now Köln, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 416, plate 7). The right-hand side panel depicts the wife of the patron, Countess Margarethe von Merode-Petershem, kneeling with a book and accompanied by St Margaret, emerging from a weasel-like dragon, and St Dimpna, piercing a chained demon with her cruciform sword.

Although the intercessions of St Margaret and other virgin martyrs are no longer relevant to the majority of the population residing in their former constituencies, the saints' presence is still tangible in everyday life. Most revealingly, the Disney Cinderellas are heavily indebted to the iconography of their medieval great-grand cousins. Birds, especially doves, frequently help Cinderella and other similar characters, and are often perceived as strangers to the material world[32]; saints are also often helped by white celestial doves, the messengers from God. The virgin martyrs' principal fight is against devils, and in their legends there is no doubt that it is they, the evil spirits and not the human persecutors, who really aim to harm the saintly girls; in Disney's Cinderella her main adversary, a mischievous cat, is called Lucifer – an ironic, although perhaps unintended, echo from the past. The fairy god-mother, who grew from the saint's nurse, has already been discussed above. The architecture of the Disney Cinderella castles is distinctively medieval – just like that of their

[30] Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 148.

[31] The chained devil or dragon is perhaps an iconographic indication of a post-medieval development of St Dimpna's cult: starting from the fifteenth century she was increasingly credited with efficiency in curing the insane and demoniacs – Margaret's early prerogative, as I have shown in my unpublished PhD thesis ('The Cult of St Margaret of Antioch', pp. 180-1). The saints' powers against madness grew particularly popular between the early seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, when a mental hospital, adjacent to the shrine and run by Augustinian nuns, was functioning in Geel until 1850; see Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 340.

[32] Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales*, p. 226.

saintly ancestors. St Margaret is best remembered by her fight with a huge demonic dragon, whom she vanquished by means of a cross held in her hand. The same idea is repeated in Disney's Sleeping Beauty, where the wicked witch, turned into a gigantic dragon, is killed with a shining sword, which looks exactly like a cross. Even the true love's first kiss of the enshrined beauty is not so far from medieval pilgrims, coming through densest forests and across deepest rivers to venerate the incorrupt bodies of the saints, whose perfect beauty, blond and immaculate, was also inherited by present-day tabloid Cinderellas (plates 8-9).

Plate 1: St Anne, teaching the Virgin to read. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved. British Library Harley MS 2897, fol. 340v

Plate 2: The nurse, teaching St Margaret to read: Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. Lit. e. 12, fol. 136v. By permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Plate 3: Troyes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS M1905, fol. 155v. Image courtesy of IRHT, Paris.

Plate 4: St Margaret Altar: North German limewood altarpiece, carved and painted, early sixteenth century, Victoria and Albert Museum (192-1866), panels 1-4.

Plate 5: Late-medieval stained glass panels from Martham (Norfolk): Margaret 1, Margaret 2, Juliana

Plate 6: St Dimpna, nineteenth century, from Geel. Images courtesy of the Royal Institute for the Artistic Heritage of Belgium.

Plate 7: The Holy Kindred and the Trinity Triptych: St Dimpna and St Margaret (Köln, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum)

Plate 8: The shrine of Snow White, surrounded by devotees (Walt Disney, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), © Disney)

Plate 9: St Margaret (fourteenth century, France), Sleeping Beauty (1959, © Disney; © 2007 USPS. All Rights Reserved), and Britney Spears (© 2003 Entertainment Weekly)